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ANNEX VIII

VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST VIEWS ON THE
LIKELY LENGTH OF THE WAR

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ANNEX VIII

VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST VIEWS ON THE
LIKELY LENGTH OF THE WAR

I. The Anticipated Timing of Victory in 1955 and 1956

During the first two years following the Geneva Conference, the Communists believed that they could attain a position of dominance in South Vietnam mainly through the medium of political, rather than military action.

[REDACTED] in September 1955 that "at present, the only way to unification of our country" is to hold the conference and elections called for under the Geneva Accords.

The Communists apparently believed that their candidates could win the elections and that it would not take long after the voting, which was scheduled under the Agreements for July 1956, to accomplish a Communist takeover. Furthermore, in 1954 South Vietnam's chances of political survival as a viable political entity appeared so slight that the Communists had every reason to anticipate an eventual collapse which would permit them to take over even if the elections were not held. A secret Communist party directive of late 1954 said that the "struggle" to assure that the "French imperialists and their puppets" leave the South was targeted for completion "within two years," and that "despite our impatience, we can accomplish this no sooner." Most of the other Communist assessments of their situation through mid-1955 were also highly optimistic and implied that victory was not far away.

From mid-1955 to mid-1956 the Communists gradually grew more pessimistic about their chances of a takeover under the terms of the Geneva Agreement, as the Diem government repeatedly refused to agree to an election which it realized the Communists would inevitably win. The Communists were never again so optimistic about their chances after their failure during this era. The evidence shows them in succeeding years to have been much more cautious and vague in their references to the time necessary to complete a takeover.

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II. Victory Timing in the Period 1956-1959

Captured documents reveal that the failure to hold the elections agreed on at Geneva resulted in deep and widespread disillusionment in Communist ranks in the South. For the next few years, party leaders in the North and the South cast about for a new strategy to accomplish their objectives. Difficulties were increased by the success of Ngo Dinh Diem's regime in repressing the low-level terrorism which had been mounted by the Communists in the hope of weakening and undercutting the Saigon government's position before and during the elections. Communist documents speak of great damage inflicted on the underground cadre organization by Diem's operations.

This combination of difficulties, particularly the Diem government's military pressure, led many of the southern Communists to believe that only a turn from reliance primarily on political action to reliance primarily on military operations against the government would bring about a Communist victory in the South. Communist documents indicate that there were various strategies put forth by the cadres in the South for insuring the success of military action. One called for concentration on the construction of a large Communist base in the highlands from which the lowlands and the population centers could be threatened. Those who advocated this policy, according to the documents, suggested that the Communists focus almost all their assets on the highlands and delay the solidification and enlargement of their position in the delta until the highlands effort was completed. Others argued for a concentration of effort in the delta to the exclusion of the highlands.

It can readily be seen that debates over strategy as basic as this would have a strong influence on Communist estimates of the time needed to accomplish their goals, and that such estimates would thus be cast in only the haziest and most indefinite of terms.

Documents indicate that the Communists eventually decided on a country-wide effort which theoretically would put equal emphasis on military and political "struggle." The documents give much of the credit for the adoption of this strategy to Le Duan, the present first secretary of the Communist Party in Hanoi. Le Duan went to the North in 1956, apparently from the top leadership position in the South. He appears to have convinced the Communist

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hierarchy in the North that an all-out military effort should be started in the South. Communist records generally date the decision to mount an all-out struggle in the South as having been made in late 1958 or early 1959.

It was clear by 1959 that the Communists were already organizing for a full-scale military effort in the South. One captured document stated that "instructions from the political department of the party in about May of 1959" reminded the cadres in the South of the "necessity of making full use of the armed forces," and that the cadres then started to "lay out" the "necessary policies." Since "October of 1959," the document asserted, "the armed forces have been fighting powerfully."

III. The Time Frame and Goals in 1959

There are no specific references in any available Communist materials as to what amount of time the Communists believed in 1959 would be necessary to accomplish a take-over of South Vietnam, or even to achieve any significant proportion of their objectives. Language on the anticipation of victory in Communist materials of this period was cast in very general terms. A broadcast by the Communists in late 1959, for example, said that the "day of victory" would "depend mainly on the changing aspects of the struggle." Such statements suggest a desire to avoid raising false hopes among the cadre or to make predictions which might later prove wrong.

Analysis of Communist materials, however, does point rather firmly to a Communist belief in 1959 and 1960 that it would take at least five years of all-out military and political action to bring about Communist domination of the South. It does not appear that they expected at this time to be in power before 1966 at the earliest. This can be inferred from indications as to what the Communists believed they had to accomplish in order to achieve victory. They fully recognized that they were still a negligible factor in the urban areas, and that in the rural areas

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their position was still weak.* That the Communists planned to take their time and build carefully was reflected in a basic order on the insurgency sent south from Hanoi in August of 1960. According to this order, the revolutionary movement was recognized as "still weak this year," but "we have the time to prepare any aspect where we are weak."

IV. The Initial Deferral of Victory Anticipations

Until early 1962 the Communists appear to have believed that they were making satisfactory progress in the development of the insurgent movement as originally envisioned.** By the spring of 1962, however, the step-up in American military assistance to the Diem regime and the counterinsurgency programs put into effect by the government had begun

*One example of their appraisal of their situation was apparent in the interrogation of a VC battalion commander captured in 1960. He stated that the Communists were at the time devoting nearly all their efforts to the rural area. He implied that the establishment of a significant urban apparatus to take advantage of the "urban uprising" which the Communists expected would take several more years.

Another 1960 captive, the chairman of a VC district committee in Kien Giang province, indicated that the Communists would be satisfied if they could make significant strides in 1960 in the elimination of government influence in the southwestern part of South Vietnam.

In a 1961 radio message, the Viet Cong leadership offered the opinion that, "depending on how the situation develops" it is "possible" that we will be able in "two or three years" to build up our units so that they "will be able to destroy part of the enemy's forces." Accomplishment of this would necessarily have left them still several years away from an overpowering position throughout the rural sections of the country.

**In at least one instance, Communist cadres were told that the situation was moving as had been forecast by top Communist authorities in 1961.

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to cause increasing difficulties for the Communists, and enemy materials indicate that their estimates of the time needed for achieving a victory were stretched out.*

It was at this point, Communist documents suggest, that the insurgents began to put more emphasis on the so-called "urban uprising," a key element in Communist guidelines for success in South Vietnam, but one that did not receive very heavy emphasis in their writings during the first few years of the insurgency. In the Communist view, victory could be anticipated as near at hand when the expansion of the Communist base among the rural populace was combined with a general uprising of the city populace against the government. This has gradually received more stress in Communist instructions to cadre in recent years.**

Communist documents indicated that, by early 1963, the Viet Cong felt they were successfully countering Diem's military push and the American effort. However, they also indicated a Viet Cong expectation that the fighting in South Vietnam still would last longer than the Communists had originally thought. One of the best summaries of Communist views on the war in early 1963 was contained in an article

*One document commenting on the period discloses that "at first we did not realize the harm and danger of the strategic hamlets," and "consequently the question of countering and destroying them was not properly examined." The same document notes that the "increase in direct aggression against us" resulted in "making the revolutionary war last longer and become more difficult." The revolution could no longer "go smoothly ahead," but would be "a long and fierce tug of war."

**An instruction document written in early 1963, for example, says that the Communists expected the "cities in the South, chiefly Saigon and Cholon, to stir up the revolution and cooperate with the rural zones when opportunity was available." According to the document, the revolution would succeed through a "combination of city and rural uprising." The Communists would be "unable to overthrow the enemy through a general offensive" by itself, if mounted mainly from the rural areas.

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by the North Vietnamese historian Minh Thuan who had often sized up the progress of the revolution since the era of the war against the French.

Thuan took the position that the insurgency had suffered "many ups and downs and many failures." The initiation of a large US advisory/support effort meant that the rebels "had to face the enemy under new circumstances" and could no longer "expect a rapid and easy victory." Thuan stressed the importance of the appearance of a "general uprising" as an omen that success was around the corner. According to Thuan, the Communists should "keep in mind the appearance of a pre-revolutionary situation" which would come about "only when the broad masses" are ready to "rise up and fight" against the regime. "Decisive victory," he declared, can be achieved "only when this pre-revolutionary situation appears."

Another Communist document of this period indicated that the Communists realized they could do little to hasten the fulfillment of their objectives. In "time to come," it said, help from the "North" and from the rest of the bloc would give the Communist armed forces the "capability to grow relatively fast." But "that is a question of time and we just cannot do it in a hurry. All our efforts up to now are just the first steps." Such statements imply that the Communists probably believed they were still at least five years away from victory.*

V. The Growth of Communist Optimism in 1964 and Early 1965

Enemy materials discussing the war situation grew progressively more optimistic during 1964, as the Communists assessed the political disarray in Saigon and the provinces following Diem's overthrow and the success of their efforts

*They were also, however, still very flexible and opportunistic, perhaps even more so than in 1959. One document, in discussing the future, said it would be necessary "to play seesaw with the enemy for a certain period." If, however, "enemy strength begins to sag significantly in the process, we will fight against the clock to overcome our weaknesses and rapidly develop our power, especially our military power, hoping to win victories of a decisive nature."

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to counter the increases in US aid to the Saigon government's anti-insurgency programs. A February 1964 article in the North Vietnamese party journal, for example, declared that the fighting, "although protracted, will not last forever," and "final victory" could be achieved "in the near future."* There were a number of Communist moves which suggested that they were trying to get in a position to take maximum and rapid advantage of the government disintegration which they expected. One such move was an effort to speedily build up Communist main force strength in the area of the III Corps north of Saigon by levying very heavy manpower quotas on the guerrilla units in the delta.

Communist optimism appeared to reach its height in early 1965. Although they still carefully refrained from fixing a definite timetable, they do appear to have believed at the time that they were possibly within a year or two of victory. This, for example, was the implication of an important article by the chairman of Hanoi's "Reunification" committees, Nguyen Van Vinh. Vinh's views have long appeared to reflect some of the inner thoughts of the top Communist leadership. Writing in the January 1965 issue of the party journal, he argued that the Republic of Vietnam forces had been forced to disperse widely and to use about half of their strength to protect the capital region. The government reserves, according to Vinh, were only about one third as great as the French reserves had been, and thus Saigon would "soon" have to abandon large areas of the countryside to the Viet Cong.

Vinh pointed to the period in 1953 and early 1954 in the war against the French as a similar one, a time in which the Viet Minh inflicted the most "decisive" defeats on the French. Vinh seemed to be implying that a similar development might take place in this war, a development which could mean a Communist military victory in 1965

*At the June 1964 congress of the National Liberation Front, the Front's president claimed a "new" period of the insurgency had arrived and the "situation has never been so bright." In July 1964, North Vietnamese Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap also saw the war as "entering a new phase," with the Communist forces in "an offensive position."

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or 1966. The insurgents, according to Vinh, were "advancing to the fulfillment" of their mission "in the coming year."*

Among the lower-level Viet Cong leaders, it appears that the idea was being promoted at this time that the "general uprising" was near. A defector from a district Communist committee in Kien Hoa Province, for example, claimed that Communist plans called for the "general uprising and complete overthrow of the government in 1966." It does not appear that the initiation of sustained US air attacks against the DRV in February 1965 or the landing of US Marine combat units in northern South Vietnam in March served initially to dampen Communist optimism.

VI. The Communist Reassessment in Mid-1965

By mid-summer 1965, the weight of the direct US combat effort in South Vietnam had thoroughly disabused the Communists of any hopes of an early victory. Both in public and in private, the probability of a protracted conflict again became a major theme in Communist statements. Nguyen Van Vinh, for example, who had spoken so optimistically in January, talked in July only of "eventual" victory. General Giap was also more sober in his assessment of the situation in July 1965 than he had been in July 1964. The entry of the US, Giap said, had created a "serious situation" throughout Vietnam.** Giap spoke only about "ultimate victory" over the US.

*A similar belief that victory might be around the corner was expressed privately by the DRV ambassador to China in a briefing of bloc diplomatic representatives in Peking early in 1965. During the year, the DRV representative said, Hanoi anticipated a "military uprising in Saigon and other towns" and a very serious disintegration of the ARVN military forces. The ambassador argued that military unity and morale were already crumbling badly and that some young ARVN officers had attempted to establish contacts with the Viet Cong.

**Giap no longer focused his main attention on the prospects for the Viet Cong, as he had in his previous assessments, but now stressed the necessity of defending the DRV against US "aggression." This in itself seemed an implicit admission of the major setback dealt to Communist hopes in Vietnam by the direct US involvement.

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In May of 1965, the top leaders of the military affairs committee of the Communist party in the South met to "assess the enemy and friendly situation." A report of that conference has been captured. It indicates that the meeting was dominated by discussions of the growing American involvement in the war. Analysis of the nature of the Communist military and political weaknesses set against those of the allies, as discussed at the session, suggests that the party hierarchy must have believed at the time that the Communist position was such that the war could easily last another three and possibly five more years.

During 1966, Communist materials have continued to reflect an expectation that the war will be indefinitely long and protracted. A January 1966 editorial in the North Vietnamese party paper, for example, claimed that the Communists still had confidence in their "final" victory, but admitted that the "enemy has not budged as yet" and his "intention" to crush the "insurgency" "had not weakened." In March, a DRV diplomat in Laos who had just returned from briefings in Hanoi said that the Communists now realized that the US war potential meant "there would be no quick and easy victory" in South Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh reaffirmed this as late as mid-July when he promised that the Vietnamese people would fight until final victory if it took "five, ten, twenty-five years, or even longer."

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